Teaching Dante Soul to Soul

Alice Mills
School of Humanities
University Of Ballarat
E-mail: a.mills@ballarat.edu.au

In my undergraduate literature units, I sometimes ask students which books, if any, have radically changed their lives. Most of the students look puzzled. Perhaps those of 18 and 19, straight from high school, are too young to have had this experience as yet; perhaps film, television, and video have taken the place of reading for many; perhaps school has not opened the way to reading books that deeply challenge students' beliefs and values. I respond to the students' puzzled silence by speaking of authors whose books changed me--Proust, Blake, Dante--and each time I hope that these names will entice one or two to read the book and find out if what mattered so much to their teacher might mean something to them.

Eventually, it was my turn among the lecturing staff to organize and teach an elective unit called Selected Authors, where the lecturer in charge chose two or three authors to study in depth. I chose Dante and Blake with trepidation and hope: trepidation, because I knew how poorly many students' cultural knowledge equipped them to read these poets; hope, that I could guide my students through the poems' belief systems and tease out how they might be relevant to us now as callers to the soul to awake.

We spent half the semester on Blake and half on Dante. At each session I read aloud, paused, commented, invited question and debate and then read on. The class found Blake much less daunting than Dante, because we started with the deceptively simple *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and moved by short increments through the minor prophetic books to Blake's *Milton*. By mid-semester, many students found themselves reading Blake's long, obscure poem with confidence.

Dante was less easy to come at. All that I could hope to do in a semester was to read through the *Inferno*. I hoped that the students' confidence with Blake might sustain them through a long poem in translation and that Blake's illustrations to Dante would help them understand Blake's passionate admiration and rejection of Dante's vision.

Some students in my three tutorials loved Dante from the first mention of being lost in a dark wood. Some felt helplessly inadequate at the sight of all the explanatory notes to each canto--all the unknown names and historical references. Most students, I think, were encouraged when I said that we were not going to explore Dante's life and times or his historical context (they could read about this for themselves, if interested). Rather, we were to consider the question of the poem's relevance to us here, now, reading it centuries later in a largely secular Western culture.

By the third week, most students were either resigned or enthusiastic as I began to ask questions about judgement and justice, categorisation and compassion. Three students, however, disagreed very strongly with the direction in which I wished to lead class discussion. One wanted me to teach Dante historically, to

explain the circles of Hell by way of Dante's involvement in local politics, and week after week he voiced the same request. Week after week I politely acknowledged his request as legitimate and reiterated that I wanted to have the class understand and explore Dante's beliefs in deity and Hell. I did not want to move from spiritual challenge to historical explanation, and so each week I smiled, acknowledged and repeated my answer.

My second student equally, if not more forcefully, expressed his belief that Dante was not a Christian; indeed, that Catholics were not Christians. He was passionate in voicing his opposition to any discussion that treated Dante as a Christian writer or that began to imply that Dante's vision might hold some spiritual truth. This student had a fearless honesty that I loved, but I did not know how I could move the discussion beyond our mutual flat rejection of each other's beliefs, and I was concerned that his forcefulness might inhibit any other students' more hesitant explorations of Dante's unfamiliar ways of thinking and evaluating the world. I tried to make it clear to the class that I was introducing a visionary poem, not trying to convert my class to believers in the system that Dante's poem sets forward. I knew how important it was to hear and acknowledge my fundamentalist Christian student's belief system. I did not know how to do so while I perceived his comments as denials of any possible truth in Dante's vision. Week after week I went to class, bracing myself for another attempt to keep opening possibilities for the group to explore rather than settling into a familiar conflict.

My third challenge came from a student who believed almost completely in Dante's theology, and who would, I think, have been happier living in Dante's Italy than in contemporary Australia. Like the other two, he was impressively well-informed and strongly assertive in his repeated invitations for me to engage with him in intellectual debate about the niceties of Dante's theology. He wanted to shift discussion from the elementary level of guidance that I was offering the others in his class, and, it seemed to me, he wanted to shift discussion away from questions of personal, contemporary relevance to the rarefied intellectual sphere of late mediaeval theology. He was frustrated and disappointed each time told him to raise his theological question with me privately, as the class was not the appropriate forum to pursue his point. Week after week, we had the same conversation, my twelfth-century advocate of killing heretics and pagans and me who occasionally noted to him that I (along with everyone else in the room) would be among those that Dante would consign to his inferno and that my student would have burned at the stake.

As the pattern of these interchanges with my three challenging students became clear, I began to imagine each tutorial session as though it were a visit to one of the circles of Dante's Hell. I am sure that all three of my students thought it their duty to guide me and my class out of the circle of error or wrongful choice in which we were wandering, just as I thought it my responsibility to keep the class focussed on the spiritual dimensions of Dante's vision and not to get stuck in denial or intellectualism or historical fact. I was not at all clear how we could get past the "stuckness" of our much-repeated conversations, yet I could not accede to their positions without losing the chance to explore whatever truths of the soul Dante might perhaps offer to a contemporary reader. I could not say no to my three students without (on both sides) frustration, disappointment, even anger and a strong sense of not being heard.

I never found an intellectual solution to this problem, but I did, at least from time to time, get past it by looking beyond the stuckness to each of these students' ardent soul. Each was passionate in his search for truth and his expectation that I would honour that search. It was easy to see the soul in search of God in the student who yearned for the twelfth-century world where he imagined a ready place for men who wanted

to serve God, the authority to punish the wicked and comfort the weak. It was easy to see the yearning soul in the student who wanted to turn from debating justice and mercy to studying local wars of Dante's time. I came to understand that he wanted to make sense of Dante's relish for vengeance, of how Dante's vision of Hell reflected a kind of Hell on Earth. I was being too glib, too comfortable in my own righteousness, when I judged that all three of these students were simply evading a powerful challenge to their current beliefs and values. They were avoiding, but at the same time their souls shone in their faces each time they asked for the class to go in a different direction.

My fundamentalist Christian student was the easiest and the hardest to keep seeing as a soul speaking to my soul: the easiest because he was so transparently honest in expressing his beliefs; the hardest because I kept getting distracted by worries of how his forcefulness might intimidate the other students. I so much wanted the class to have an opportunity to think about judgements of right and wrong, and yet I seemed to be caught in living out a series of clashing judgements in tutorial after tutorial. Moving beyond this clash of values and beliefs took all my skills of balance, and I could only admire my student's willingness to keep coming back to class.

At the end of semester *Purgatorio* was in sight. Students wrote their final essay on the descent to the underworld and the way out again, as the topic had meaning for them. Some spoke eloquently of the world around them, taking me on a Dantean tour of shopping malls, abortion clinics, hospitals, political campaigns, discos and banks. Some trusted me with their souls' secrets. Some, no doubt, wrote their piece to please me and gladly left the unit behind. My three students all did well, and yet I was left wondering how I might have dealt with them differently, or whether getting stuck in a pattern of mutual frustration was a necessary part of teaching Dante soul to soul.

The student who wanted an historical approach went on to choose more elective units with me despite knowing that I would not take an historical approach. The student who told me that Dante was not a Christian enrolled in my unit on myth, despite knowing that part of the unit would involve studying mythic elements in the Bible. Something kept these two coming back for more, and that was all I could ask for. My student who so much wanted to debate Aquinas with me fell sick and left the university. Months later, he telephoned me from hospital to tell me that he was dying. He was reading Dante again and working his way through the *Paradiso*. He thanked me for having introduced him to a writer who was helping him through his death. I have tears in my eyes as I remember that telephone call; soul speaking to soul.

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